Virgil's verse invitus, regina... and its poetic antecedents

Virgil's verse *invitus, regina* … and its poetic antecedents

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[[*More modoque: Die Wurzeln der europäischen Kultur und deren Rezeption im Orient und Okzident. Festschrift für Miklós Maróth zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (ed. P. Fodor, Gy. Mayer, M. Monostori, K. Szovák, L. Takács) 155-165. Budapest 2013.

The original page-numbers of the printed version will be indicated within braces ("{" and "}"). For example, "{155|156}" indicates where p. 155 of the printed version ends and p. 156 begins.]]

This essay, written in honor of Miklós Maróth, focuses on a problematic verse in Virgil's *Aeneid* 6.460. I propose to show a new point of comparison that affects the overall interpretation of the context of this verse.

I begin by outlining the context.

During his sojourn in Hades, Aeneas encounters the shade of his former lover, the queen Dido, who had committed suicide after he had abandoned her in Carthage. Aeneas says to Dido:

456 infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo
457 venerat exstinctam ferroque extrema secutam?
458 funeris heu tibi causa fui? per sidera iuro,
459 per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est,
460 <u>invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi</u>.
461 sed me iussa deum, quae nunc has ire per umbras,
462 per loca senta situ cogunt noctemque profundam,
463 imperiis egere suis; …

456 Unfortunate Dido! So it was true, then, the news that I got.
457 It came to me and said that you had perished, that you had followed through on your final moments with a sword.
458 So your death, ah, was caused by me? But I swear by the stars,
459 and by the powers above - and by anything here that I could swear by, under the earth in its deepest parts:
460 <u>Unwillingly, queen, did I depart from your shore</u>.

461 But I was driven by the orders of the gods, which force me even now to pass through the shades,

462 passing through places stained with decay, and through the deepest night.

463 Yes, I was driven by their projects of empire.

Virgil *Aeneid* 6.456-463

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In verse 460 of this passage, the poet is making a reference to a verse in Poem 66 of Catullus, where a lock of hair originating from another queen, Berenice, is speaking:

invita, o regina, tuo de vertice cessi

Unwillingly, O queen, did I depart from the top of your head.

Catullus 66.39

Consensus has it that Poem 66 of Catullus is a remaking or even a "translation" of a poem of Callimachus known as the *Lock of Berenice* (*Coma Berenices*, Callimachus fragment 110 ed. R. Pfeiffer). According to this poem, a lock of hair that was cut off as a votive offering from the head of the Ptolemaic Queen Berenice is dedicated at a temple of Aphrodite - only to disappear and then miraculously reappear as a constellation in the heavens.

There is no consensus, however, among experts who try to explain the reasons for Virgil's reference to the *Lock of Berenice* in the context of his narrating the encounter of Aeneas with Dido in Hades. In offering my own explanation, I apply the concept of "window reference" as developed by Richard Thomas:[1]

> [A "window reference" is] the very close adaptation of a model, noticeably interrupted in order to allow reference back to the source of that model: the intermediate model thus serves as a sort of window onto the ultimate source, whose version is otherwise not visible. In the process the immediate, or chief, model is in some fashion "corrected."[2]

This concept has been applied also by Hayden Pelliccia, who argues that the "*invitus regina ...*" verse in *Aeneid* 6.460 "exploits an interpretatively problematic reference" to the "*invita, o regina ...*" verse in Catullus 66.39 in order to "open a window" onto a "larger and superficially less problematic" source.[3] In the case of the "*invitus regina ...*" verse in *Aeneid* 6.460, Pelliccia argues that it originated from a poetic tradition about Protesilaos and Laodameia, a pair of lovers who are seen as models for Aeneas and Dido. A primary source for

[1] Thomas 1980.
[2] Thomas 1980:188 = 1999:130.
[3] Pelliccia 2010-2011:201n145.

Virgil, Pelliccia argues further, was the tragedy *Protesilaos* of Euripides, only fragments of which have survived.

While I agree with Pelliccia that the primary source for the "*invitus regina ...*" verse in *Aeneid* 6.460 is most likely a tragedy composed by {156|157} Euripides, I think that the poetic tradition reflected by this source was not primarily about Protesilaos and Laodameia. Rather, it was primarily - though perhaps not exclusively - about another pair of lovers, Theseus and Ariadne. We know that Euripides actually composed a tragedy, now lost, by the title of *Theseus*, featuring Ariadne herself as one of the characters. But the question is, how would we explain Theseus and Ariadne as the most likely referents for the "*invitus regina ...*" verse in *Aeneid* 6.460? By the time we reach the end of this essay, I will have a tentative answer to this question.

The lock of hair that gets severed from the head of Berenice and becomes a constellation in the heavens is parallel, I argue, to something precious that gets severed from the head of Ariadne: that something is a garland worn by this doomed lover of Theseus, which becomes a constellation in its own right, known as the *Stephanos* or *Corona* of Ariadne. The story of this catasterism of Ariadne's garland is retold in many sources, which show many mutually contradictory variants, as we can see even from the succinct reportage we find in "Eratosthenes" *Katasterismoi* 27.5 and Hyginus *Astronomica* 2.5.

The mythological foundations of storytelling about the garland of Ariadne and how it was turned into a constellation are most ancient, going all the way back to the Minoan-Mycenaean era.[4] From later eras, we get a wealth of relevant evidence from the visual as well as the verbal arts.[5] In the case of the visual evidence, I cite for example the report of Pausanias 5.19.1 describing a scene depicted on the Chest of Kypselos, of Corinthian workmanship and dating to the early sixth century BCE: in this scene, Ariadne is featured together with Theseus, and she is holding a garland while Theseus holds a lyre.[6] Similarly, in a picture painted on an Attic vase dated to the middle of the sixth century (Munich 2243; ABV 163, 2), we see Theseus fighting the Minotaur while Ariadne stands by, holding a garland in her left hand and a ball of woolen thread in her right hand; the goddess Athena is also standing by, holding in her right hand the lyre of Theseus.[7]

The ball of woolen thread is familiar to us from the existing literary evidence for the myth. It is signaled, for example, in Catullus 64.113 and in *Aeneid* 6.30. But what about the garland of Ariadne?

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[4] Blech 1982:259-262.
[5] This evidence is surveyed by Blech 1982:262-267.
[6] Blech 1982:263.
[7] Blech 1982:264.

According to an epitomized narrative derived from Epimenides of Crete (FGH 457 F 19 = DK 3 B 25), the garland of Ariadne had been given to her as a gift by the god Dionysus, who intended to destroy (*phtheirai*) her, and she was in fact deceived (*ēpatēthē*) by the gift; but Theseus was saved {157|158} (*sōthēnai*) by the same gift, since the garland of Ariadne radiated for him a mystical light that helped him escape from the labyrinth; after Theseus and Ariadne eloped to the island of Naxos, the mystical garland was turned into a constellation. By implication, the deception of Ariadne by way of the garland given to her by Dionysus is correlated with the salvation of Theseus by way of that same garland. By further implication, Ariadne must die at Naxos, and it is this death that is compensated by the catasterism of her garland.

According to another version that we find in the Homeric *Odyssey* (xi 321-325), Theseus and Ariadne elope not to Naxos but to an island closer to Crete, Dia, where Ariadne is killed by the goddess Artemis; the god Dionysus is somehow involved, by way of 'witnessing' the things that happened (*marturiēisi* xi 325).[8]

According to yet another version, as recorded in the scholia MV for *Odyssey* xi 322 and attributed to Pherecydes (FGH 3 F 148), Ariadne and Theseus elope to the island of Dia and fall asleep on the shore after having made love there. While they sleep, Athena appears in the middle of the night and wakes up Theseus, telling him to proceed to Athens. When Ariadne wakes up in the morning and finds herself all alone on the shore, she laments piteously. Aphrodite comforts her, telling her that Dionysus will make her his woman. Then Dionysus appears in an epiphany and makes love to Ariadne, giving her a golden garland. Then Artemis kills Ariadne. And the garland is turned into a constellation - an event described as gratifying to Dionysus.

As we see in Poem 66 of Catullus, derived from the *Lock of Berenice* by Callimachus (fragment 110), this ancient constellation of the Garland of Ariadne is already set in its rightful place in the sky when the new constellation of the Lock of Berenice arrives to join it:

59 inde Venus vario ne solum in lumine caeli
60 ex Ariadneis aurea temporibus
61 fixa corona foret, sed nos quoque fulgeremus,
62 devotae flavi verticis exuviae,
63 uvidulam a fluctu cedentem ad templa deum me
64 sidus in antiquis diva novum posuit:
65 Virginis et saevi contingens namque Leonis
66 lumina, Callisto iuncta Lycaoniae,

[8] The Homeric passage leaves it open whether Dionysus instigates the killing of Ariadne; so I cannot follow in its entirety the interpretation of Barrett 1964:223.

67 vertor in occasum, tardum dux ante Booten,
68 qui vix sero alto mergitur Oceano. {158|159}

59 Then Venus,[9] intending not to let it happen, in the varied light of the sky, that only
60 the golden thing originating from the head of Ariadne,
61 her garland [*corona*], should have a fixed place there, but rather, that I too [= the lock of Berenice] might send forth a flashing light,
62 votive prize that I am, originating from a blond head of hair,
63 me, dripping wet from the rough seas of my weeping while heading straight for the celestial zones of the gods,
64 me did the goddess [Venus] situate, in the midst of old constellations, as a new one.
65 For, right next to the lights of Virgo and savage Leo,
66 next to their radiances, and joined to Callisto daughter of Lycaon,
67 I take my turn heading down into the western horizon, ahead of slow Boötes,
68 who plunges ever too late into the deep river Okeanos.

Catullus 66.59-68

The new companionship of the Lock of Berenice with the Garland of Ariadne is a perfect fit, since a garland is meant to adorn a head of hair. And even the blond hair of Berenice, as we just saw it described in Catullus 66.62, matches the blond hair of Ariadne, which is highlighted in Catullus 64.63 at the very moment when she comes emotionally undone, having just been abandoned by Theseus. And the blond hair of Ariadne matches in turn the blond hair of Dido in *Aeneid* 4.589, which is being cut off at the very moment when she too comes emotionally undone and commits suicide.

So far, I have argued that the lock of hair that gets severed from the head of Berenice and becomes a constellation in the sky is parallel to the Garland of Ariadne. But now I will argue further that the "*invitus regina* ..." verse in *Aeneid* 6.460, referring to the doomed love affair of Dido and Aeneas, is a "window reference" to a poetic tradition about the doomed love affair of Ariadne and Theseus through the intermediacy of the "*invita, o regina* ..." verse in Catullus 66.39. Through this window reference, the parallelism of Dido and Ariadne comes to life.

Others too have noted the parallelism between Dido and Ariadne as doomed lovers. A prominent example is Jeffrey Wills, who calls attention to the plaintive words of Ariadne in Catullus 64.133, where the abandoned woman addresses the absent Theseus and reproaches him for leaving her all alone *in litore*, 'on the shore' of the island Dia.[10] When Aeneas in *Aeneid*

[9] The verb that goes with the subject "Venus" is postponed until verse 64.
[10] Wills 1998:293.

6.460 {159|160} protests to the shade of Dido that he had departed unwillingly *tuo de litore*, 'from your shore', Virgil's words evoke the old poetry about Ariadne, not only the new poetry about the lock of Berenice, which is actually derived from the old poetry about the garland of Ariadne. As Wills observes, "Virgil has now entered into this tradition in an extraordinary way - without mentioning either Ariadne or Berenice. Rather, he reuses language which Catullus has associated with them."[11]

But the question remains: just how old is the old poetry about Ariadne, as distinct from the new poetry about the lock of Berenice? This new poetry goes back to Callimachus, yes, but even that source is new poetry, I argue, in comparison to the source signaled by Virgil in *Aeneid* 6.460. In terms of my argument, Virgil's "window reference" here goes back to an older form of poetry. Like Pelliccia, I think that a lost tragedy by Euripides may be the primary source. What is more to the point, however, is that this source reflects - though perhaps not exclusively - an Athenian version of the myth of Theseus and Ariadne. Whether or not the myth has been worked over by Euripides, the agenda of the myth can be shown to be distinctly Athenian, going back to the glory days of the Athenian Empire.

The myth is attested in a picture painted on a lekythos attributed to the Pan Painter, dated around 470 BCE (Taranto IG 4545). Here is a line drawing by Tina Ross, presented in rollout mode:

{160|161}

[11] Wills 1998:294.

This picture captures the moment when Athena appears to Theseus after he has made love with Ariadne. The couple has fallen asleep after the lovemaking, but Athena awakens Theseus, gently gesturing for him to be quiet and not to awaken Ariadne, who is held fast in her sleep by a little figure of Hypnos perched on top of her head. The details have been described this way:

> Here we see the couple at the moment of separation. Athena has just wakened Theseus, and as she bends over him he begins to rise, bending one leg and sitting up from the pillow on which he has lain next to Ariadne. Athena tries to quiet him as he stretches out his arm, a gesture of remonstration or inquiry. In the upper left hand corner is a small female figure flying into the night.[12]

I note that the small female figure who is "flying into the night" is disheveled, with her hair flying in the wind and with her clothing in disarray. I interpret this figure as a prefiguring of Ariadne herself at a later moment, the morning after, when she wakes up to find that she has been abandoned by Theseus. I recall here the verse in Catullus 64.63 where the headdress that had held the hair of Ariadne together has now come undone, and she looks like a bacchant, a frenzied devotee of Bacchus, that is, of the god Dionysus. And it is this same Bacchic frenzy, signaled by her disheveled hair, that will now attract Dionysus to her.[13]

In contrast to the morning after, when Ariadne in her Bacchic frenzy will come undone, the picture of Ariadne in the present is eerily peaceful:

> Ariadne faces us directly, an unusual pose that points to her oblivion to what is happening behind her as well as allowing us a clear view of the peaceful contentment registered on her face. Her eyes are closed tight, and she will not awaken as Theseus departs, for the figure of Hypnos, Sleep, sits on her head with legs drawn up as he sleeps.[14]

As Richard Thomas points out to me (2012.12.08), there is a remarkable parallel in Virgil's *Aeneid* 4.556–572, where Mercury appears in a vision to a sleeping Aeneas (557 *in somnis*, 572 *e somno*), at which point the hero immediately leaves Carthage (579–583).

Returning to the picture painted on the lekythos, I draw attention to another figure. Besides the sleeping Ariadne and the little sleeping Hypnos {161|162} perched on top of her head, we see also the figure of a wakeful boy reclining on the farther side of the bed, to our left, whose head is positioned directly below the miniature figure of the hovering girl with the

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[12] Oakley and Sinos 1993:37. Their interpretation of this painting differs from mine in some other respects.

[13] I have much more to say about the poetics of Dionysiac dishevelment and eroticism in Nagy 2007.

[14] Oakley and Sinos 1993:37.

disheveled hair. In my interpretation, this boy is Eros, who had instigated a night of intense lovemaking between Ariadne and Theseus.

So why is Theseus prompted by Athena to wake up and secretly leave Ariadne, making his way back to Athens? Why must Ariadne be left behind, pathetically abandoned on the shore of the idyllic place where she has just made love to Theseus? It is because duty calls Theseus back to Athens. Just as Aeneas in *Aeneid* 6 is driven by 'the orders of the gods' (461), by 'their projects of empire' (463), as I have translated it, so also Theseus is driven by the orders of the goddess Athena, whose intervention in the myth of Theseus is an expression of older 'projects of empire'. In this case, I mean the Athenian Empire of the fifth century BCE. According to Athenian mythology as it was taking shape in that era, Athens had become a successor to the Minoan Empire that Theseus himself had overcome once upon a time.[15]

In non-Athenian versions of the myth, as we have already seen, Theseus was saved from the labyrinth primarily by the Minoan princess Ariadne, with the help of her radiant garland and her ball of woolen thread. In the Athenian version, by contrast, Theseus did not really need the help of Ariadne all that much. And the garland of Ariadne can even be replaced by a garland given to Theseus by the sea nymph Amphitrite, as we see in Song 17 of Bacchylides (109-116): in this version, the garland is made of roses. In other variants of the myth, the garland is made of gold, as we see from the testimony of Pausanias, who describes a painting that covered one full wall of the sanctuary of Theseus in Athens. In the context of his description, Pausanias offers a retelling of the myth, which he says is only partially retold through the medium of the painting: {162|163}

> When Minos was taking Theseus and the rest of the delegation of young men and women to Crete he fell in love with Periboia, and when Theseus opposed him by objecting, he [= Minos] insulted him and said that he [= Theseus] was not the son of Poseidon, since he [= Theseus] could not recover for him [= Minos] the signet ring [*sphragis*] which he [= Minos] happened to be wearing, if he threw it into the sea. With these words Minos is said to have thrown the signet ring [*sphragis*], but they say that Theseus emerged from the sea holding that ring and also a gold garland [*stephanos*] that Amphitrite gave him.[16]

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[15] On Theseus as the notional founder of the Athenian Empire, understood to be the notional successor of the Minoan Empire, see Nagy 2009 E§§161-163, 168-169 = 2010:364-365, 368. Such an ideology about an Athenian Empire had a start even before the era of the Athenian Democracy. Already in the era of the Peisistratidai, who dominated Athens in the second half of the sixth century BCE, we see clear signs of what I am calling here 'the projects of empire': see especially Nagy 2009 E§169 = 2010:368. In the same work, I offer a general summary of the imperial ambitions of Athens in the era of the Peisistratidai (2009 I§§7-12 = 2010:6-7). In that era, as we see from the incisive analysis of Frame 2009:323, myths about the love affairs of Theseus with a variety of heroines, including Ariadne, were extensively rethought.

[16] For further attestations of the garland of Amphitrite, see Blech 1982:265-266.

Pausanias 1.17.3

Just as Theseus does not need Ariadne all that much in the Athenian version of the myth, so also Aeneas does not need Dido all that much in the story of their doomed love affair. After all, as Leonard Muellner has argued, the *pietas* of Aeneas as the once and future founder of the Roman empire is ultimately incompatible with the *furor* or 'frenzy' of Dido. In the narrative about the death of Dido in *Aeneid* 4, as Muellner notes, we see a clear sign of this incompatibility:

> When the self-destructive fire of passionate love within her emerges as the fire of her funeral pyre, she [= Dido] cannot actually die. As a person invested with *furor* by Venus, she is by definition hostile to *fatum*, to Aeneas' destiny to be sure, but even to her own wished-for death, which should not have happened at this point in her life. So a *dea ex machina*, Iris the rainbow goddess, is sent from heaven by Juno to effectuate the impossible.[17]

Here Muellner cites the actual verses of *Aeneid* 4.696-705, where Iris finally cuts off the blond hair of Dido from her head, ending it all for the doomed lover of Aeneas. I quote here only the beginning of the scene:

> nam quia nec fato merita nec morte peribat
> sed misera ante diem subitoque accensa furore
> nondum illi flavum Proserpina vertice crinem
> abstulerat, ...
>
> For, since she was about to die neither by fate nor by a deserved death,
> but before her day, the poor wretch, inflamed as she was by her sudden frenzy [*furor*], {163|164}
> it had not yet happened to her that the blond hair on the top of her head [*vertex*], at the hands of the goddess of death,
> was to be taken away from her.

Virgil *Aeneid* 696-699

And just as Dido experiences a Bacchic *furor* or 'frenzy' in reaction to her abandonment by Aeneas, thus showing her incompatibility with the once and future founder of the Roman Empire, so also Ariadne in Catullus 64 is *furens* 'frenzied' in verse 124, experiencing *furores* 'moments of frenzy' in verses 54 and 94. In this reaction, Ariadne shows her own incompatibility with Theseus, that once and future founder of the Athenian Empire. But this same incompatibility translates into a compatibility with Bacchus. More than that, it translates

[17] Muellner 2012.

into an attraction, even a fatal attraction, since Ariadne, in her Bacchic frenzy, attracted the attention of Dionysus.

So ends the story of Ariadne. And, as I begin to bring my own analysis to an end, I quote a succinct retelling in Greek. It comes from a description of wine vessels made by the god Hephaistos as a present for Dionysus on the occasion of his wedding with Ariadne:

> τοὺς Ἥφαιστος ἔτευξεν ἀριπρεπέι Διονύσῳ
> δῶρον, ὅτ' εἰς Οὔλυμπον ἀνήγαγε δῖαν ἄκοιτιν
> Μίνωος κούρην ἐρικυδέα, τήν ποτε Θησεὺς
> κάλλιπεν οὐκ ἐθέλων <γε> περικλύστῳ ἐνὶ Δίῃ·
> They [= the wine vessels] were made by Hephaistos for most radiant Dionysus
> as a gift, at the time when he took to Olympus as his luminous bride
> the daughter of Minos, that most glorious one, the one whom Theseus once upon a time
> left behind - unwillingly - on that island surrounded by the sea, Dia.
>
> Quintus of Smyrna 4.386-389[18]

The Greek wording here, showing an unwilling Theseus abandoning his wretched lover Ariadne, raises a final question, anticipated already at the beginning of this essay: would there have been an occasion for Theseus to say to Ariadne the words that Aeneas said to Dido? I quote again those memorable words: {164|165}

> invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi.
> Unwillingly, queen, did I depart from your shore.
>
> Virgil *Aeneid* 6.460

My answer is: yes, there could have been such an occasion. Just as Aeneas saw Dido in Hades after her death when the hero visited Hades, so also Theseus could have seen Ariadne in Hades after her death when this hero too visited Hades. In the *Frogs* of Aristophanes, we see a parodic reference to a tragic scene featuring the catabasis of Theseus and Peirithoös into the realm of the dead (at verse 142, Theseus is mentioned by name). And we know directly about such a catabasis from a fragment of Hesiod, F 280, describing the experiences of Theseus and Peirithoös in the realm of the dead. These experiences include a verbal exchange between Theseus and the shade of Meleager, starting at verse 10 of the fragment. And here the comparative evidence of *Odyssey* xi 321-325 becomes vital: when Odysseus experiences his own catabasis by visiting Hades, he sees the shade of Ariadne there, and that is where the story of her abandonment by Theseus is retold. By the same token, Theseus in his catabasis could likewise have seen the shade of Ariadne, now in Hades after her dalliance with Dionysus and

[18] Part of this passage is cited by Pelliccia 2010-2011:153n12. He raises the possibility that Quintus was alluding to Virgil here, but I have my doubts about that.

her death at the hands of Artemis, and the words he may have addressed to her could be matched most perfectly, Greek to Latin, by the words spoken by Aeneas to the shade of Dido.

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